

The
Ancient Egyptian
Scarab



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and Precious Stones

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NEW YORK CITY

The Ancient Egyptian Scarab
It's History and Symbolic
Significance

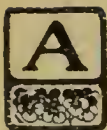


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AFTER having fallen into desuetude for many years, the ancient Egyptian scarab of 2,500 years ago is again coming into popular favor, according to reports from Europe and this country. Dug out from its long sleep, the jeweler is resuscitating "his bugship," and the historic and symbolic significance surrounding the insect when expounded to the uninitiated public is likely to prolong the period of scarab activity as a decorative feature.

Scarabs are not the only beetles that have been used as adornments of the human person. The writer remembers in his youth how the beautiful blue and purple metallic sheen of the Ceylon beetles' "case wings" figured as favorites, gold mounted, in scarf pins, brooches, etc. Again, more recently, the iridescent South American bug of smaller size but similar color scheme, chained alive, with golden fetters attached to one leg, crawled languidly over my lady's bosom, to the disgust of some, amusement of others, and surprise of all but the wearers.

But in utilizing the Egyptian scarab as a decorative feature we are feeling back into history and symbolism of a almost interesting period of the world's civilization. Of immense interest from the artisan's standpoint is the fact that the Egypt of those periods was the birthplace of most of our inherited art forms—the source from whence the ancient Greeks derived most of their motifs which they developed from their cruder originality into that perfection of symmetrical form never since surpassed. Under the tutelage of Isis and Osiris, the Egyptian cult brought forth much for art lovers.

What is a Scarab?

The *Scaraboeus sacer*, of Linnaeus, or the *Ateuchus sacer* or *Aegyptiorum* of Cuvier, known in history and mythology as the "sacred beetle" of Egypt, abounds throughout the east. It is found all over South Europe, East Indies, Cape of Good Hope, Western Asia and North Africa. The Latin word *scaraboeus* (from which we derive our word *scarab*) comes from the Greek *skarabaïos*, which signified this same insect.



Fig. 1. The True Scarab Beetle.

Pliny's *Natural History* says: "The *scaraboeus* also, that forms pellets and rolls them along. It is on account of this kind of *scaraboeus* that the people of a great part of Egypt worship these insects as divinities, an usage for which Apion gives a curious reason, asserting, as he does, by way of justifying the rites of his nation, that the insect in its operations portrays the revolution of the sun. One ancient writer, Horapollo, declares the scarab denoted "the only begotten, or generation, or a father, or the world, or

a man. The 'only begotten' because the scaraboeus is a creature self produced, being unconceived by a female."

Plutarch wrote: "The Egyptian warriors had a beetle carved upon their signets because there is no such thing as a female bee (for they are all males) for the propagation of it is unique and after this manner:—when the male is desirous of procreating, he takes the dung of an Ox and shapes it into spherical form like the world; he then rolls it from him by the hinder parts from East to West, looking himself towards the East, that he may impart to it the figure of the world ('for that is borne from East to West, while the course of the stars is from West to East'), then, having dug a hole the scaraboeus deposits this ball in the earth for the space of 28 days ('for in so many days the moon passes through the 12 signs of the zodiac'). By thus remaining under the moon, the race of scaraboei is induced with life: and upon the nine and 20th day after, having opened the ball it casts it into the water, for it is aware that upon that day the conjunction of the moon and sun takes place, as well as the generation of the world. From the ball thus opened in the water the animals, that is the scaraboe, issue forth. The scaraboeus also symbolizes generation, for the reason before mentioned; and a father, because the scarabocus is engendered by a father only and the world, because in its generation it is fashioned in the form of the world; and a man, because there is not any female race among them."

From the above authoritative description it cannot fail to dawn on American readers (especially those hailing from the southern States) that in Mr. Scarab we

have no other than our familiar, and grotesque, Mr. Tumble-bug, that we have watched so often rolling his excreta burden along our sandy soils on hot summer days. A glimpse at his portrait, as depicted in Fig. 1, will strengthen our conviction, for the likeness is too familiar to deceive. The whole evidence is so conclusive that we can drop the question of identity and turn to his symbolic side.

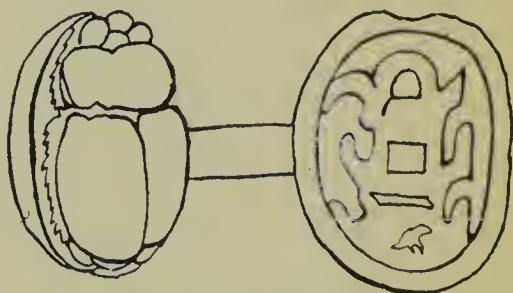


Fig. 2. Middle Kingdom Scarabs.

Scarabs in History.

Among the many relics of ancient Egypt that were found in most prolific number was the facsimile of the scarab, or "sacred" beetle. The beetle form figured on the obverse side, and hieroglyphic inscriptions were on the reverse side. A sample of the common form is shown in Fig. 2. They were found made of clay, they were cut out or hard stone. They are discovered in steatite (a soapstone), green basalt, diorite, granite, hematite, lapis lazuli, jasper, serpentine, verde, antique, smalt, root of plasma or prase

(a species of chalcedony having green streaks of hornblend), carnelian, amethyst, sardonyx, agate and onyx.

They were found in myriads in the tombs and in the ruins of temples. Each had its peculiar hieroglyphic inscription. For many years the Egyptologists threw them aside as unworthy of attention; they could not read any sense or meaning in their thousands of mysterious incisions.

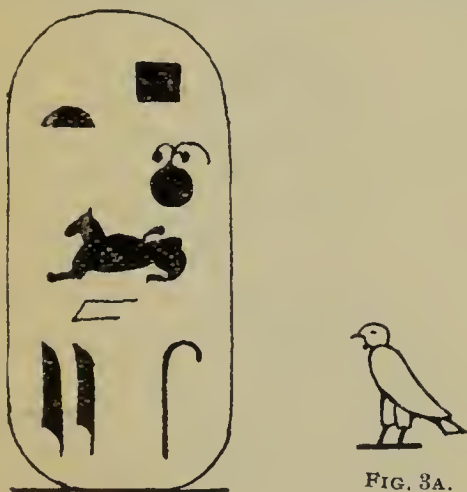


FIG. 3A.

Fig. 3. Cartouche of Ptolemy.

They became a plague to the collectors even in their unending multitude, and were discarded as the meaningless toys of a foolish people.

But with the discovery of the full intent of the Egyptian hieroglyphic language a change came in the collector's attitude. The incisions in those apparently in-

significant bug effigies, that had got into the museums and collectors' hands in almost unwelcome quantities, became the most valuable keys to unlock the history of the land of the Nile. Their style and their inscriptions denoted different periods of the dynastic reigns, and in a short space of time the experts could place the date of origin of each scarab, and, better

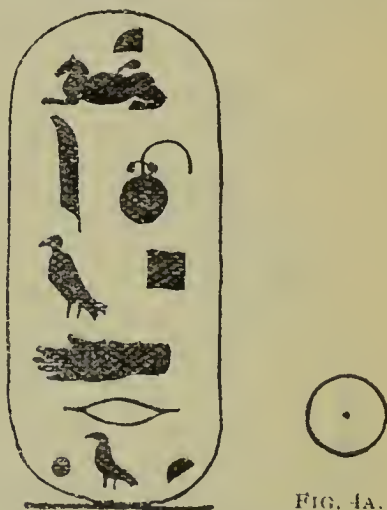


FIG. 4A.

Fig. 4. Cartouche of Cleopatra.

still, each scarab told its bit of history of that date. And thus our hundreds of thousands of scarabs furnish us with whole volumes of Egyptian history as valuable as that read in the hieroglyphs on the tombs and monuments of the Nile valley.

These multitudes of scarabs contained, besides hieroglyphic reading decorative

designs such as scroll, spiral, twist and key patterns, but all had their symbolic significance. The period when they were produced most prolifically was during the reign of Tehutimes (Thothmes III. of the XVIII Dynasty), about 1600 to 1566 B. C. Very many originated in the XIX. and XX. Dynasties. A peculiar feature still puzzling to Egyptologists is the fact that although each Pharaoh had his peculiar style of scarab, several Pharaohs had reissues made from those of predecessors. And so, though nearly all the many scarabs can be ascribed to certain dates by their style, another source of bewilderment occurs in these anomalous "reissues." And although all scarabs may look more or less alike to the outsider, the expert can place them practically all in their periods.

The earliest scarabs date back to the III. Dynasty (Neb-ka), about 3900 B. C. Scarabs almost ceased to exist about 500 B. C. Under the Heretic kings of the XVIII. Dynasty scarabs went out of use, but once again came into favor in the reign of Hor-em-heb and Sethi I., when rings again became fashionable in Egypt. Their symbolic sacred acceptance lasted over a span of 3,000 years.

Symbolic Significance of the Scarab.

Perhaps the most interesting fact (from a theological standpoint) that the scarab presents to 20th century readers is that it is the oldest expression of the ancient conception of the soul's immortality to reach us so far. This date of the ancient Egyptian dogma of a future eternal life for the pious and moral dead reaches far further back than Moses time. For the scarab was a symbol of the resurrection, or new birth, and the eternal future life

of the "triumphant" or "justified" dead. (The dead, whether king or commoner, had to pass the ordeal of a trial at the hands of the priests as to whether the past life of the deceased "justified" immortality by mummification). The searab symbol in its day very closely resembled in intent our Christian symbol of the cross. It stood for resurrection of the soul as well as immortality.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

The scarab was especially sacred to Amen-Ra—the mystery of the sun-god. It symbolized creative and fertilizing power. It was the first life appearing in the Nile's mud when the sun commenced to dry the shores after the waters receded.)

Ptah, the Creative Power, and Khepera (or Khepra), the Creator, another deity of high degree, had the scarab as emblem. As Ptah it usually had the head and legs of a man. "Kheper" means "to be," "to exist," "to become," "to create," "to emanate" in the hieroglyphic language; this was represented by a scarab.

Right here, perhaps, a few words as to the sun deities of Egypt becomes neces-

sary to avoid confusion. The sun, rising in the morning as Horus (Fig.3a) reaches its zenith at noon as Ra (Fig.4a) and sets in the evening, in the dark regions, as Tum, absent at night as Osiris, often rises victorious over darkness in triumph again as Horus.

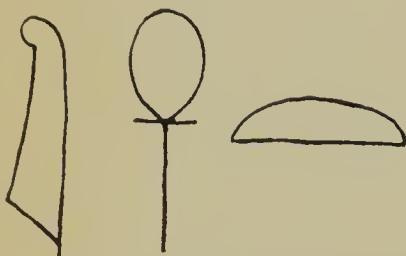


Fig. 7.

Thus we read: "In the Great Temple at Thebes a scarab had been found with two heads, one of a ram, the symbol of Amen (or Ammon), the hidden, or mysterious, highest deity of the priesthood, especially of Thebes; the other of the hawk (the symbol of Horus, Fig.3a), holding in its claws a symbol of the universe." This is supposed to symbolize the rising sun and coming of the Spring sun of the vernal equinox in the zodiacal sign of the ram.

The number of the toes (30) of the scarab beetle symbolized the days of the month, we are informed. The movement of the ball it manipulates, we must remember, symbolizes, among other things, the action of Ra, the Egyptian sun-god, at midday.

The Uses of the Scarab.

The uses to which scarabs were put were numerous. They were used by monarchs for sending out proclamations. These were mostly unusually large. Many were worn as amulets. Numbers of scarabs have ornaments or general inscriptions, some have personal names and friendly wishes (these were probably presents to friends). Again, scarabs have been found strung together like beads for religious purposes similar to our rosary. Of those used for social purposes some have "Good

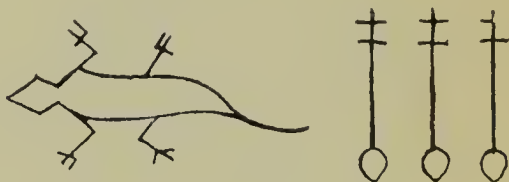


Fig. 8.

Luck" signs, or "A Happy Life"; these were used for sealing letters. Those having the cartouche of the reigning Pharaoh were no doubt worn out of loyalty. (See Figs. 2, 3 and 4). Some were joined to the representation of the human heart, on which was inscribed "Life, Stability and Protection." They were talismans. Some had the names of deities, officials, private persons. Some had monograms.

One large class, known as heart scarabs are found in mummies. They are from two to three inches long, and replaced the heart which had been taken out in the process of embalming. They are mostly of hard yellowish or dark green stone. Ac-

According to the ancient Egyptian faith the human being had two souls—Ka was the vital soul. Ba was the responsible soul (genius). The heart of man was considered the source from whence life as well as thought proceeded. Hence the scarab (symbolizing resurrection) was buried with mummies to assist preserve the body for future reunion with the spirit. Egyptian soldiers wore scarabs as charms to increase their bravery. Women wore them to increase fertility.

And now just a word as to their composition. The soft soapstone scarabs were glazed in the fire, using different colored enamels, usually bluish green. The ones discovered in these days of a brownish or dirty white are those that have had their enamel chewed off by the teeth of Time, thus baring the stone from which they were carved. Some were made in porcelain and—very rarely—some of colored glass. Some are in gold or ivory, or even wood. Those of a brown tint were originally of a green glaze which has faded; the white were originally blue unless perhaps some dating from the time of Amen-hotep III.

CARTOUCHES.

The broad oval outline of the scarab was in the earlier Egyptian period used as a distinctive framework in which to inclose the hieroglyphic names of Egyptian kings. But in later historic inscriptions this wide oval circle surrounding the royal name (known as a "cartouche") gave way to a much more elongated cartouche, as is illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4. Hence the shape of the scarab outline in a cartouche assists to the knowledge of its relatively early date if of wide oval form, while the

more lengthened cartouche outline is proof of production at the later period. It was known as "R E N."

The Scarab in Jewelry.

Scarabs were a favorite form of signet for finger rings, in which cases they revolved on an axis. The flat incised surface (reverse was worn next the finger). When it was to be used for official signatures the ring was taken off the finger and the scarab side turned inward to allow the impression to be made. Now, very few scarab rings are ever found mounted in gold or cut in the precious stones. There

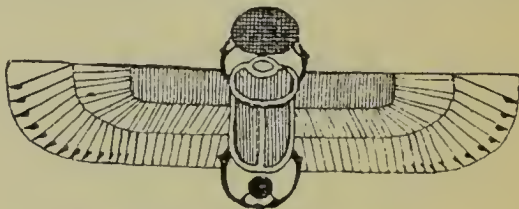


Fig. 9. Winged Scarab.

are only very, very few extant. Some are in the Cairo Museum, and in these the jeweler's art shows really wonderful workmanship. The fact of their almost entire absence, however, must in nowise be considered proof that the ancient Egyptians owned but few such really valuable gems. The tombs of the Egyptian kings wherever recognizable had been for centuries looted by passing Arabs, and these later-day inhabitants knew the value of the precious metals and precious stones, but they had no use for glazed bug effigies and they attached no significance to hieroglyphics. Hence the scar-

ness of golden mounts and precious stones in the scarab outfit of the mighty of the day to reach down to our times. From those still existing we know that during and after the XII. Dynasty (2778 to 2565 B. C.) beautiful productions were made of gold and precious stones. All this might be supposed, for Isis was a patron of the arts.



Fig. 10. Ornamental Form of Scarab.

A few words dedicated to the subject may prove useful to such manufacturers who desire to intensify the mystic intent of their bug designs. To such end the few definitions that follow may prove useful.

Figs. 5 and 6 represent respectively "Life" and "Truth." Thus the trio of symbols on fig. 7 reads: "Lord of Truth and Life." And this combination on a scarab was used as an amulet for bringing luck to the bearer.

On a presentation ring to one's fiancée

the symbolic words on Fig. 8 engraved on the reverse of a scarab are highly complimentary, though to present-day eyes they smack of lizards and digging tools. They convey the flattering words, "Abounding in Graces."

A very great favorite form of scarab decoration with the ancient Egyptians is reproduced in Fig. 9, known generally as a winged scarab. To make a long story short, wings spread out in this fashion were symbolic of "protection"—in this case, of course, "divine" protection, for the scarab was the emblem of the divinity Kheper. It was also symbolical of death under certain condition.

And finally a useful form of scarab decoration is found in the familiar winged beetle given in Fig. 10.

Glancing back at the cartouches of Ptolemy and Cleopatra in the last issue, it may prove of interest to state that these two royal cartouches figured very usefully in the unraveling of the ancient languages, for they are alphabetic arrangements of the hieroglyphic signature. And the knowledge that the one representing Ptolemy, having the recumbent animal as the fourth letter (L) tallies with second letter in Cleopatra (L) teaches us that the bird (Horus) figuring as sixth and ninth proves Horus to represent our letter A.

